H-Diplo Roundtables

Bruce Kuklick. Blind Oracles: Intellectuals and War from Kennan to Kissinger. Princeton University Press, 2006.

Roundtable Editor: Thomas Maddux

Reviewers: Robert Jervis, Charles Maier, Anders Stephanson, Jeremi Suri.

Commentary by Jeremi Suri, University of Wisconsin-Madison

In January 1961 McGeorge Bundy wrote to Henry Kissinger with an important request: the "president has asked me to talk with you at your early convenience about the possibility of joining up down here." "The only complication in the situation," Bundy explained, "is that more than one part of the government may want to get you. [The President] does not want to seem to interfere with any particular department's needs, but he does want you to know that if you should be interested, he himself would like to explore the notion of your joining the small group which Walt Rostow and I will be putting together for his direct use." Bundy later added: "We count on having your help, particularly in the general area of weapons and policy and in the special field of thinking about all aspects of the problem of Germany." Kissinger was one of the many intellectuals in high demand as President Kennedy sought to make American foreign policy more vigorous and effective.[1]

Less than ten years later, in May 1970, Thomas Schelling, Richard Neustadt, and many of the other intellectuals who worked for Washington during the heady days of the Kennedy administration turned on Kissinger, now President Nixon's special assistant for national security affairs and chief foreign policy aid. Kissinger's former colleagues condemned the expansion of the Vietnam War into neighboring Cambodia, and the Nixon administration's apparent commitment to escalation rather than disengagement. Schelling recounted: "We had a very painful hour and a half with Henry, persuading him we were all horrified not just about the Cambodia decision, but what it implied about the way the President makes up his mind." The "best and the brightest," who embraced the high hopes of the Kennedy New Frontier agenda, now called for Kissinger to separate himself from the "monster" policies pursued by Nixon, especially in Vietnam.[2]

---

[1] McGeorge Bundy to Henry Kissinger, 28 January 1961; Bundy to Kissinger, 18 February 1961, Folder: Staff Memoranda, Henry Kissinger, 5/61, National Security Files [hereafter NSF], John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston, Mass. [hereafter JFKL]. See also McGeorge Bundy to President Kennedy, 8 February 1961, Folder: Staff Memoranda, Henry Kissinger, 1/61-4/61, Box 320, NSF, JFKL.

[2] For an account of the 8 May 1970 meeting between Kissinger and the Harvard faculty visiting Washington, see Mike Kinsley, "I think we have a very unhappy colleague-on-leave tonight," *Harvard Crimson* (19 May 1970). Kuklick also discusses this meeting on 201-02. See also David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972); Kai Bird, *The Color of Truth: McGeorge Bundy and William Bundy, Brothers in Arms* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998).

Bruce Kuklick's probing and iconoclastic book meditates on this shift. Why did so many policy intellectuals turn against Kissinger and the policies of the Nixon administration? How did they separate themselves from the assumptions and institutions they had, at least in part, supported? Most significant, how did the best minds construct a series of "lessons" from their experiences that simultaneously assured their intellectual standing and absolved them of guilt for the disasters they wrought? Kuklick is "skeptical about the knowledge that all of these men declared to have. While they professed deep understanding, they actually groped in the dark. Much of the time fashion was more important than validity" (15).

Kuklick diminishes the role of Cold War intellectuals in actual policy-making, but he elevates their desire for prestige and acceptance. They were, he argues, skilled at telling powerful political figures what they wanted to hear. In a stunning passage, Kuklick explains: "As the Johnson administration slid into Vietnam, what is noteworthy is not a strategic concept that scholars might formulate in graduate study in a center of higher learning, but the absence of such a concept. The leadership moved hesitantly ahead. The fundamental commitment, born of a determination not to lose Vietnam but also of the uncertainty of Johnson and his advisors about what they should do, was compatible with *any* of the strategic theories advanced in the 1960s…In academic circles the niceties of each notion made careers in major universities. In Washington one or all of them might serve as a rationale for what would have been done on other grounds…Johnson got a respectable label for what he was doing" (143-44).

The "best and the brightest" did not make the crucial decisions in Vietnam and elsewhere, but they reinforced political inclinations toward global containment, limited warfare, and counter-insurgency. They greased the war machine. Kuklick reminds readers that men like Thomas Schelling not only defended flawed decisions; they went a step further. In his celebrated collection of essays on *Arms and Influence*, published in 1966, Schelling argued that President Johnson's retaliation for the alleged North Vietnamese attacks on American destroyers in the summer of 1964 ("the Gulf of Tonkin Incident") was a an example of effective signaling through force. He legitimized this crucial expansion in American military engagement and presidential commitment to the Vietnam War as an act appropriately tailored to the nature of the threat and the interests of the United States. Schelling could not know about all the problems with Johnson's assessment of the event and his decision-making process at the time, but his writing, along with the work of other prominent strategic theorists (including Kissinger), made it harder to oppose the war in the middle 1960s on strategic grounds. Cutting-edge intellectuals encouraged Johnson to growl at the enemy, rather than step back and reassess the situation (136-151).

Kuklick's analysis pulls no punches, but it avoids simple caricature portrayals of complex figures. Much of the literature on Cold War intellectuals, especially the nuclear strategists, approaches its subjects in one of two ways: as creative pioneers or evil geniuses – Robert Oppenheimer or Edward Teller, Bernard Brodie or Herman Kahn. For Kuklick this is a false dichotomy. Richard Neustadt is Kuklick's archetypal figure – a respectable, humane man, who sought to make ideas serve the legitimate purposes of the president in a dangerous world. Neustadt worked to bring historically grounded analogies from prior periods into the service of a leader making sense of a complex world. His counterparts at RAND and other venues used

mathematical models influenced by operations research and game theory for the same basic purpose.[3]

Neustadt's investigations did not really point to new directions in policy, according to Kuklick. They did not question first principles or offer a new overall concept for strategy. Instead, they optimized existing processes and encouraged the president to exert firmer leadership along the basic Cold War course. Again, Vietnam provides the best evidence. Drawing on the work of Marc Trachtenberg and others, Kuklick shows that ideas about "flexible response" did not transform the U.S. strategic posture. Neustadt, Robert McNamara, Carl Kaysen, William Kaufmann, Albert Wohlstetter, and others gave Kennedy and Johnson leverage to pull reluctant branches of government behind their schemes for overseas intervention. "[S]trategic theories were put into play to legitimate political decisions that were made about pressing policy matters (103).[4]

Kuklick reserves his harshest criticisms for the "bureaucratic politics" model of policy analysis that Neustadt and his Kennedy School of Government colleague, Ernest May, nurtured in the late 1960s. After arguing for firm presidential leadership, this analytical lens blamed the provincialism, distortion, and resistance of lower level government offices for failures of policy. Military figures undermined opportunities for negotiated settlement. Ambassadors and other diplomats "in country" voiced the needs of their particular areas, losing sight of the broader interrelation between different regions. Presidential decisions reflected a careful and integrated global analysis that local actors of all varieties adapted to their particular purposes, producing results that contradicted White House intentions. As they advocated strong leadership in Vietnam and other venues, Cold War intellectuals blamed others for the unsatisfactory results. Kuklick is particularly hard-hitting on this point: "The politicians who took the United States into the war and who had been celebrated as 'can-do' decision makers suddenly became victims of institutional mismanagement…Bureaucratic politics was a tool to get policymakers off the hook of Vietnam" (163, 167).

Men like Neustadt found a clever way to boost their influence in creating a dynamic chief executive while absolving themselves of responsibility for the consequences of his actions. This was a self-serving rationalization that they applied inconsistently. When the presidents they worked for were in the White House, they adopted the bureaucratic politics explanation. When Richard Nixon assumed power, they fell back on blaming the man in the Oval Office, and his closest intellectual advisor, Henry Kissinger. As Kuklick points out, the most remarkable element of the May 1970 meeting between Kissinger and his Harvard colleagues was the Cambridge group's refusal to accept that anyone other than the top leadership was to blame.

---

[3] For some of the best studies of the nuclear strategists in the Cold War, see Marc Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 3-46; Fred Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983); Gregg Herken, *Counsels of War*, expanded edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

[4] Kuklick draws heavily throughout his book on Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). He also draws on Francis J. Gavin, "The Myth of Flexible Response: United States Strategy in Europe during the 1960s," *International History Review* 23 (2001), 847-75.

What happened to the bureaucratic politics model? Kennedy and Johnson were good men (with good advisors) who were poorly served by their bureaucracies. Nixon, in contrast, was a "monster" who deserved personal condemnation. Kissinger should have resigned from his position of influence, despite the fact that he was doing exactly what his Harvard colleagues hoped to do for Kennedy and Johnson – apply scholarly ideas to real world problems. Kissinger was surely flawed in his endeavors, but how was his position different from Bundy or McNamara a few years before?[5]

Kuklick offers a sympathetic portrait of Kissinger as a "the defense intellectual of the postwar era supremely gifted in translating ideas into politics" (202). Collaborating with Nixon, he used détente to transform the basic structure of the Cold War. This included a series of agreements for the management of disputes with the Soviet Union, an opening of U.S. relations with China, and a departure from Vietnam that preserved the illusion (perhaps fiction) of American strength in the region. Kissinger's actions surrounding the Vietnam War remain controversial, particularly in light of the 20,000 Americans who died as a consequence, but Kuklick gives him credit for adopting a strategic concept that did not merely rationalize existing policies.

Rejecting the focus on processes, mathematical models, and analogical reasoning that guided many other intellectuals, Kissinger emphasized the limits of American power and the role of diplomacy as a mechanism for compromise, rather than victory or defeat. He extolled the virtues of a strong statesman who mixed force with negotiations – sticks with carrots – to choose lesser evils that would preserve his nation's international standing as much as possible. Although this position produced some disastrous results, as in Vietnam, it moved American policy off the track it traveled in the previous decade. Assumptions about the ability of the U.S. to change the world, through force of arms and ideas, would not recover a hold on the strategic imagination until after the stunning events at the end of the Cold War. Fashionable as always, the intellectuals who initially justified the New Frontier now blamed Kissinger for not departing enough from it in his continued adherence to a global vision of American power.[6]

Kuklick's analysis opens a Pandora 's Box of disturbing questions about the intersection of knowledge and power. Did the desire for policy influence corrupt academic research? Yes, Kuklick argues in his criticism of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard and the bureaucratic politics model. Did intellectuals deepen the conflict and suffering in the Cold War. Yes, Kuklick appears to answer again. His book provides few counter-examples of intellectuals who contributed to improvements in policy, to something other than continued Cold War. Kissinger is the only major exception for Kuklick, but Kissinger's legacy hardly restores optimism about the possibilities of cerebral leadership.

There are, however, alternative perspectives that Kuklick does not explore. First, what about the contributions of intellectuals outside grand strategy? For example, one can look to the young

[5] See Andrew Preston's excellent new book on McGeorge Bundy and the Vietnam War, *The War Council: McGeorge Bundy, the NSC, and Vietnam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006).

[6] See Kuklick's excellent chapter on Kissinger, 182-203. I will explore many of these issues in my forthcoming book, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

men of letters – including McGeorge Bundy, Walt Rostow, and Henry Kissinger – who assumed enormous responsibility for the conduct of war and reconstruction in the 1940s. Intellectuals on both sides of Atlantic Ocean played crucial roles in the formulation of the Marshall Plan. The same can be said for the scores of intellectual figures from the U.S. and Japan who worked with General Douglas MacArthur after 1945. Perhaps intellectuals are most effective when they have a narrow policy scope and more direct, even personal, connection with their area of work. The contrast between George Kennan's prescient writings about the Soviet Union (that he knew well) and his condescending prescriptions for Latin America (that he hardly knew) make this point.[7]

Second, is it possible that the intellectuals Kuklick describes had a more favorable influence on high level policy than he acknowledges? In the formation of strategic doctrine, Bernard Brodie, Albert Wohlstetter, Thomas Schelling, and others played a major role in articulating key concepts that anchored a half century of nuclear stability and war avoidance. Through published writings and government-sponsored studies these men helped to explain why foreign policy in a thermonuclear world had to follow different guidelines from its pre-nuclear predecessors. Limited wars in local areas of dispute, especially Berlin and the Taiwan Strait, now threatened global annihilation. At the same time, excessive fear of conflict with a treacherous adversary risked defeatism at home and among allies. Thermonuclear deterrence, buttressed by secure second-strike capabilities, developed in both the United States and the Soviet Union thanks, at least in part, to the work of strategic intellectuals. They formulated the language and models for doctrinal practice. The same can be said for methods of conflict management on display in Cuba and Berlin. Kennedy and Khrushchev carefully signaled one another about resolve, while also leaving space for each to back down with minimal public audience costs. Neither leader consciously turned to the strategic intellectuals in navigating the crises, but both leaders followed logics for the "manipulation of risk" and "confidence building" outlined by these thinkers. By the 1960s American politicians and many of their foreign counterparts had internalized the canons of nuclear strategy. This was the "common knowledge" of the Cold War that helped avoid catastrophe.[8]

One could take this argument a step further, and point to the influence of intellectuals on arms control and, ultimately, the end of the Cold War. During the 1950s scientists and other intellectual figures encouraged the U.S. government, and its counterparts in Europe, to begin a process of negotiating limits on the arms race with the Soviet Union. Between 1945 and 1955 Washington and Moscow did not engage in any serious arms control discussions. Public pressures, inspired and legitimized by figures like George Kennan, encouraged President Dwight Eisenhower to explore a nuclear test ban and agreements to reduce fears of surprise attack. The administration's dramatic "open skies" proposal of 1955 was, in fact, authored by academics like Walt Rostow assembled around Nelson Rockefeller. Intellectuals made direct contributions to the evolving norms and procedures for arms control during the Cold War.[9]

---

[7] This general point follows Melvyn Leffler's compelling account of American postwar prudence in Western Europe and Japan, and flawed judgment in the "Third World." See *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

[8] See the sources cited in note 3 and Campbell Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan: Total War in the Realism of Niebuhr, Morgenthau, and Waltz* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Arms control negotiations provided a foundation for broader cooperation among intellectuals that, in part, transformed the international system. Beginning in the mid-1960s the policy institutes that Kuklick frequently criticizes, particularly the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, pioneered a series of exchanges with representatives from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Scholars traveled to their counterparts' countries to discuss their research and contemporary politics. They formed collaborative projects on common challenges, including urban crowding, poverty, education, and domestic disorder. Many of the men and women who participated in these East-West exchanges developed a sense of shared mission in humanizing the Cold War through military de-escalation, increased openness, and a commitment to peace – especially in Europe. Despite the continuing pressures of bipolar conflict, people began to think in terms of interdependence and mutual gains.

This was the bright shining hope of détente for intellectuals, despite the stalemated geopolitics of the 1970s. Upon assuming the leadership of the Soviet Union in 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev empowered many of the young "institutniki" – including Georgy Shakhnazarov, Andrei Kortunov, and Aleksei Arbatov – who came of age through these exchanges. As the new General Secretary worked to reform communism, his favored intellectuals encouraged him to pursue a more cooperative relationship with the West. The young men and women in the Soviet Union who imbibed an international discourse about humane alternatives to the Cold War contributed to what became Gorbachev's stunning "New Thinking." Drawing on the ideas that academics had debated in international conferences during the last decade, Gorbachev broke with conventional wisdom on nuclear disarmament, political openness, and ultimately, national autonomy within the Soviet empire.[10]

Bruce Kuklick's book does not range quite this far, nor should it. He is rightly concerned with the thinking and influence of the most privileged and respected American policy intellectuals during the Cold War. Kuklick is masterful in his reconstruction of their thought and his deconstruction of their contribution to the projection of American power. He shows that the Cold War intellectuals were less insightful than they claimed and more destructive than they admitted. This is a compelling verdict, but an incomplete one. The same intellectuals who made a mess of Vietnam also contributed to the democratic reconstruction of Western Europe after the Second World War, thermonuclear stability after 1949, and the processes that unfroze the Cold War stalemate in the 1980s. Politicians made the key decisions, but intellectuals played crucial legitimizing and even agenda-setting roles for transformative events.

---

[9] See Robert A. Divine, *Blowing on the Wind: The Nuclear Test Ban Debate, 1954-1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Herbert F. York, *Making Weapons, Talking Peace: A Physicist's Odyssey from Hiroshima to Geneva* (New York: Basic Books, 1989); James Killian, Jr., *Sputnik, Scientists, and Eisenhower: A Memoir of the First Special Assistant to the President for Science and Technology* (Cambridge, Mass: M.I.T. Press, 1977).

[10] See Robert D. English, *Russia and the Idea of the West: Gorbachev, Intellectuals, and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Jeffrey Checkel, *Ideas and International Political Change: Soviet/Russian Behavior and the End of the Cold War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); Daniel C. Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect: International Norms, Human Rights, and the Demise of Communism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Jeremi Suri, "Explaining the End of the Cold War: A New Historical Consensus?" *Journal of Cold War Studies* 4 (Fall 2002), 60-92.

In this sense, Kuklick is too cynical. Intellectuals made a difference for better and for worse in the Cold War, as they have in the decade-and-a-half since. *Blind Oracles* cautions against the hubris, the political cravenness, and the hypocrisy that turned ideas to disaster in Vietnam and other Cold War battlefields. This history, however, should inspire more intellectual engagement with policy, not less. Politicians badly need new and creative ideas. More important, they need men and women of integrity who are willing to recognize the limits of their knowledge and the possibilities for honest adaptation to circumstance. Henry Kissinger attained extraordinary influence because he promised to fill this niche for both Kennedy and Nixon. His failings, like those of his predecessors, should not blind us to the real possibilities of the intellectual in action. Without the service of scholars, the past and future of American foreign policy would probably look worse.

Copyright ©2006 by H-Diplo, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.